

Report on Stories in Transit I

Storytelling Workshop in Palermo, 26th-28th September 2016

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‘Human cognition is alert, attentive, responsive. Above all, it is *imaginative*: it can think beyond the constraints of immediate experience, do strange things with words, conjure up futures and histories of all kinds, bring to life people who never existed and invent for them plausible stories and environments. Despite the tangible evidence that this is so, the word ‘cognition’ has traditionally been used to refer to the rational knowledge-seeking processes of the mind as opposed to other modes of engagement with the world.’

Terence Cave in *Thinking with Literature*.

In times of great physical deprivation and dislocation, this project sets out to make the argument that everyone has the right of access to a life of the mind and creative potential and that the conditions of refugees should reflect this principle.

By collaborating with small groups of young refugees, Stories in Transit aims to uphold the right of refugees to cultural expression, making possible ways to exercise that right, by encouraging displaced and dislocated individuals to tell stories, and to inspire them to draw on their own traditions and faculty of imagination.

We are spurred on by a dual hope:

First, to make possible a space in which stories can be told, from traditional materials the participants bring to the event and remember from their own past, as well as their own personal stories, if they wish to tell them.

Secondly, to develop ideas about what the project can do best and what is needed to bring that about for the future.

We set out to explore four key issues:

1. Can culture, and specifically storytelling, in every form of narrative expression, provide a form of shelter for people who have lost their homes? Can a tale become a home? A *lieu de mémoire*? Can a memory of literature and the process of making it over and over again build ‘a country of words’? Can narratives build a place of belonging for those without a nation?
2. What cultural steps can be taken to affirm the right of refugees/ migrants/ arrivants to freedom of thought and imagination – intellectual mobility? Is expressing the imagination and passing on traditions and testimony part of human rights?
3. What methods and processes can be developed together to allow the unfolding and generation of stories? What role can imaginary, mythic narratives play in contemporary conditions? In what ways can the ancient human capacity to tell and pass on stories help in the present crisis? Can make-believe help make-truth?
4. What are the best uses of contemporary media for supporting exchanges of stories across borders and ease communications between languages and cultures?

Early on in the process, I noticed that a refugee child called Farah in a camp in Jordan had made a drawing (published by Save the Children) of a crowd gathering around ... the lorry delivering water. Like the fountains and springs, cisterns and

pumps where news and stories used to be exchanged, like the magic wells in so many fairy tales where encounters take place, and carry the characters over into another dimension of reality, the water supply created a place of exchange and fellowship. It strikes me as beautiful and profoundly right that the Arabic verb *rawaa* means both to water or irrigate and to relate; and that a *raawi* is a transmitter of poetry. As the comparative literature scholar and Arabist Philip Kennedy comments, ‘*Rawwii* is well-watered; there are lots of versions of the root, including *riwaaya* which now means a story (or novel).’^[1]

The focus in the Palermo workshops was on methods of communicating stories, especially in the absence of a common language: gesture, music, mime, puppetry and performance. We therefore held the events in

1. the Museo Internazionale delle Marionette ‘Antonio Pasqualino’ in the heart of the old city,
2. in a historic community centre, the Oratorio di Santa Chiara (where the work of Danilo Dolci continues), and
3. in the nearby community café Moltivolti (many faces) in Ballarò, the traditionally multi-ethnic region of the city.

Over forty ‘creatives’ and thinkers were invited to come to Palermo: poets, musicians, storytellers, theatre practitioners, film-makers, academics specializing in migration, and writers; between us we spoke many languages (including Bambara!) and remembered many cultures, including Eritrea, Iraq, Palestine, and the Caribbean; we travelled from UK, US, Europe and the Middle East (some of

these participants paid for themselves). In Sicily, Dr. Valentina Castagna, translator and scholar of English studies at the University of Palermo, made contact with teachers, lawyers, community workers, and psychiatrists who have worked with and continue to work with the thousands of arrivants on the island. Many of these are themselves former refugees/arrivants from earlier wars and disasters, who are now working with the community of newly arrived refugees. We were also joined by lawyers, teachers, social workers, and psychologists deeply engaged with the crisis. Several other people (creatives and psychotherapists) wanted to contribute; visitors to the museum, including a Canadian artist and a doctor who was attending a conference elsewhere, decided to stay with us.

It was not possible beforehand to ascertain how many of the refugees/arrivants would be able to come to the workshops; in the end around 80 came, many more than we had expected. All of them were *minorenni non accompagnati* ('unaccompanied minors'), from Egypt, Libya, Syria, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Mali, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire and other places; all male, except for one girl (rather worrying). These young people are not kept in 'the welcome centres' where adults are detained because they are minors and so enjoy greater rights to freedom under international law, respected by the Italian authorities. They were brought by their mentors and teachers, after school. These professionals, deeply involved in work with this huge community of refugees landing in Sicily are the most remarkable and inspiring people; our chief contact is Clelia Bartoli, who under the rubric 'Polipolis', has developed a theory of teaching multi-lingual refugees. We were very privileged to hear them speak in the mornings about their efforts, struggles, campaigns and ideas, and to be trusted to exchange methods and material with them and with their charges during the afternoon workshop sessions.

Their young charges had all recently made the passage across the Mediterranean from Libya and were from West Africa (many of them Francophone), Somalia, Ethiopia, and Egypt. They had mostly arrived within the last fortnight, and were now generally looking well. Before that they had been held, most of them, in Libyan jails in conditions of hard labour (the teachers told me). Yet they were responsive, lively, and eager to contribute - if bemused by the unfamiliarity of the activities.

Each day began with talks, discussions and demonstrations.

- Ben Haggarty opened the workshop by reminding us that lullabies, riddles, clapping games etc. are common to us all and then asked us to remember examples; we gathered in small groups and, Opie-style, recorded instances.
- The Palestinian-Egyptian poet Tamim al-Barghouti talked about tales of movement and parting in Arabic culture, and stressed that in a time of state collapse and widespread turmoil, ‘it’s a matter of choosing the narrative’.
- Kate Higginbottom unfolded the exhilarating work of the travelling family theatre troupe, [Nicole et Martin](#): ‘The body knows things of which the mind knows nothing’
- Maria Amidu, a trustee of the charity [People United](#), described her work, called ‘A Moment of Your Time’ she created for a gallery (Turner Contemporary, Margate) within a policy strand called Art & Kindness.
- The poets Steve Willey and Philip Terry unfolded ways of eliciting creative work – Steve brought valuable experience of working in Gaza in a community arts centre.
- The composer Stevie Wishart demonstrated the hurdy gurdy, an instrument associated with travellers, and intrinsically egalitarian, she argued; she

demonstrated methods of montaging one popular, easy tune onto another: a form of combinatorial music close to tale-telling in structure.

- Sindi Gordon, from the University of Sussex, who opened a creative workshop in a barber shop basement in Brighton, remembered how the Bajun writer Paule Marshall was inspired by freewheeling, wide-ranging, exuberant talk around the kitchen table of her family and friends who had left Barbados for New York.
- On the key question of rights to utterance, Lyndsey Stonebridge from the University of East Anglia spoke eloquently ('Memory is not enough')
- Fulvio Vassallo Paleologo, a distinguished lawyer from the University of Palermo deplored, with powerfully marshalled facts about the illegality as well as the human injustice of many nations' current strategies to deter refugees.
- Another former arrivant, the storyteller and musician Yousif Latif Jaralla, who fled Iraq in the 90s, gave us an evening performance of poetic, tragic tales fashioned from news stories, reciting to thrilling drumming and cello accompaniment.
- Two film-makers, both of them also former arrivants, talked about the films they had made: Khaled al-Nassiryi managed to crowd source support for his successful, ebullient comedy *On the Bride's Side*, and Dagmawi Yimer, director of *Va, Pensiero* and other lyrical documentaries, described how he was resigned to the fact that his refugee identity was inescapable – he would always be 'someone who landed in Lampedusa from Ethiopia'. Yet humour is one of the most powerful tonics yet discovered, and poetic reshaping another; expressions like these two men's films are winged vehicles. As the

poet Alice Oswald commented, ‘You’ve got to make something living, and thinking isn’t living.’

We invited the NGO [Libraries without Borders](#) (Bibliothèques sans Frontières) to come and demonstrate their Ideas Box, a set of adaptable, brightly coloured containers which open up to various uses and configurations: schoolroom, cinema, computer centre; the Boxes come with their own solar powered and massively capacious server. This agency’s work has affinities with our project, but also significant differences : above all, their emphasis is pedagogical, not ‘artistic’ or creative.

In the afternoon, after the young arrivants had joined us, we split into groups with at least 2 *nessi* (‘links’ in Italian – the term we adopted instead of ‘facilitator’) in each group, and then we tried out different suggested ways of encouraging expression.

We gave a colour to each group, and a box covered in that colour - for example, azure, orange, and saffron, which are so connected to Sicily (interestingly, when translated into Italian, often showed their Arabic origins). We then arranged ourselves on rugs and cushions, around the box, which we used in different ways.

The processes aimed at gathering ideas for a possible Story Box, a cross between a tool kit, a circus hamper, and an old toy chest – which would contain all kinds of materials and instruments for encouraging the making of stories in all media. Such a box needs to be durable, light, cheap, and reproducible, so it can be reproduced and distributed to refugee communities in camps or elsewhere. The box could itself be some kind of flat-packed enclave or shelter, and open up to demarcate a precinct, a space with a difference from the confines of the camp or ‘welcome

centre’, a form of shelter where fantasy and invention, memories and improvisation could happen: a word parcel, not a food parcel, packed with what UNESCO supports as ‘intangible culture’.

Because it was the first time most of us had taken part in such an activity, and because so many more young refugees joined us than expected, things began happening spontaneously (very lively): a flurry of poems, a nonsense song or two (one beginning, ‘Obladih-obladah goes fish/Singing allez Man Utd...’), some movement, percussion, clapping, and dance routines, some improvised songs, moved us towards an atmosphere of mutual trust and laughter and – even – joy. As Valentina Castagna comments, **‘The students who told their stories, shared their culture and especially those who recited their poems (in their own languages, translated by other people in the group) felt somehow empowered, as if this act of being heard and listened to and of sharing, allowed them to take back their identities besides the label of refugees.’** The harvest of actual tales, poems, or fully formed artifacts was small, but the process is under way, and the event itself, the contact, exchanges, collaborative endeavour, met part of our hopes, building common ground and opening onto possibilities.

The hospitality and meals at the different venues were splendid – and much enjoyed by the young refugees themselves, with whom we also ate at Moltivolti.

The activities were recorded in full by Andrea Canova Zarza, of the Sound Archive at the British Library; they have been edited into chapters and are [uploaded](#) to a suitable platform.

In the wrap-up session after the third workshop, some criticisms arose among the group of visiting speakers and *nessi*: one or two felt overwhelmed by the

experience of the collaboration with refugees, and would have liked more psychological preparation by us, the organisers. Some also felt at a loss on account of language barriers. Others said that professional ‘trainers’ should be employed, and that our close contact with the young people over the three days seemed to promise more to them than we could responsibly deliver. The puppets in the museum had disturbed some: too sinister, too violent, and the portrayal of the Moors in the traditional Sicilian Orlando cycle problematic. (On this last point, the young people themselves were very entertained, however, and pleased to attend something they had not had a chance to see before, and took pictures on their phones throughout.)

We are taking stock of these criticisms and will follow up on them in the planning and activities on our return to Palermo. For example, we are planning a creative workshop, when the arrivants will be invited to make puppets and reimagine the traditional storylines and representations.

On reflection, I realise there are three fundamental principles of the project that I don’t want to lose sight of:

1. The aim is to reweave threads of culture from the arrivants themselves – the stuff they are bearing with them in their heads when everything else has gone.
2. Fantastic word-spinning lifts the spirits, invention and dreaming can take you out of yourself and unite you with others in a different way from revisiting the scene of personal suffering; even a violent and distressing story, like the fall of Troy or the Tale of Abu Mohammed the Lazy or of Hasan of Basra (all of which contain terrible scenes of rape, trafficking, calamity, savagery) offer horizons that

orient the horrors that many are fleeing in ways that will not increase their trauma but make sense of it and offer solidarity across eons.

3. Any expression (stories, music, performance, art for that matter) does not need to be more than 'good-enough'. The point is to express something, to bring forth and to do something together. Great things might or will follow somewhere at some point.

4. Culture-making and creativity do not take place to act primarily as therapy; they might have an effect that is consoling and binding, but they do not set out to be therapeutic. Trained individuals will be needed in camps, reception centres or refugees hostels, to introduce and unpack and explain our potential story box, as Libraries without Borders trains locals to explore the potential uses of their Ideas Box. But I hope Stories in Transit will replicate social gathering – round the well, the hearth, the campfire – and spontaneous human communication, not professional or therapeutic sessions.

There was strong enthusiasm to our collaboration from those there on the ground, who know the situation. The gatherings taught us a huge amount and have helped shape our thoughts for the future so that the project can develop and mutate for the better. There have already been developments that carry on the idea (eg [Words on the Move](#))